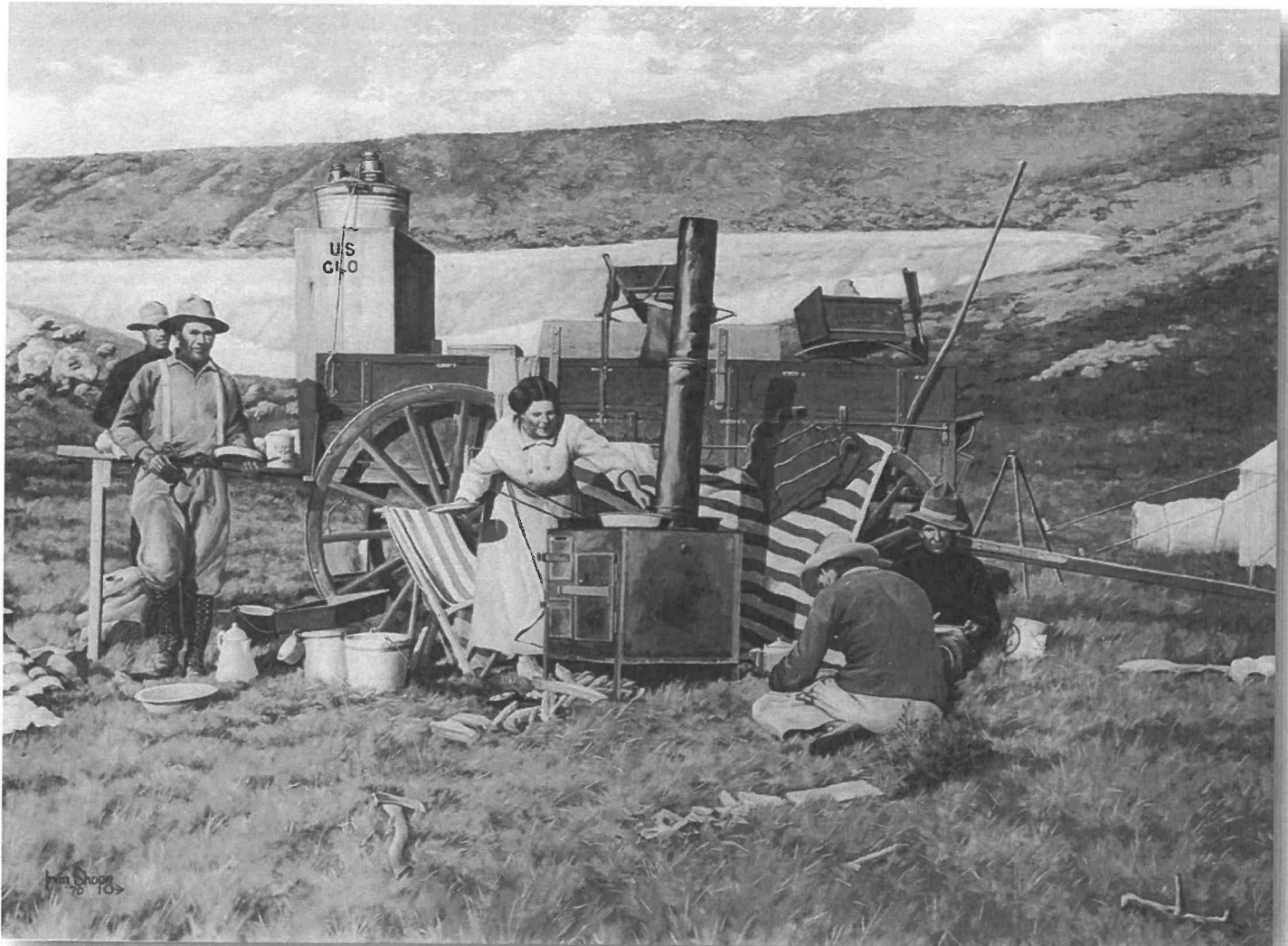


# Breakfast on the Big Horns

W.R. Bandy

**Editor's Note:** In last month's *From The Archives*, we featured the painting titled "Breakfast in the Big Horns", which depicts a survey crew in the Big Horn Mountains in Wyoming in 1912. The following is the story from W.R. Bandy that accompanies the painting.



## BREAKFAST ON THE BIG HORNS

By W. R. Bandy

This colorful painting is from an early morning photograph of an over-night camp of my survey party on the summit of the Big Horn Mountains in northern Wyoming. It was breakfast time on that August morning back in 1912. The survey crew was nearing the end of a 200 mile move overland by horse-drawn wagons in order to survey some Homestead lands along the Little Big Horn River. We had camped by this giant bank of last winter's snow because melting snow provided water for our horses and camp. We had found water scarce along the ancient Indian trail we had been following northward along the summit of the Big Horn Range. Most of the springs and water holes in the vicinity of the trail were well down on the slopes, difficult to reach with the heavily loaded wagons. We had traveled late before finding the trickle of water from the snow drift.

We carried with us food supplies, horse feed, tents, dishes, bed-rolls and everything needed for camping out, thus being prepared to live off the country for weeks at a time. It will be remembered that this was long before the day of the plush motels and roadside hamburger stands now available to cross country travelers.

It was the custom then throughout the west for travelers to go prepared to stop wherever night overtook them. Therefore, freighters, surveyors, stockmen and others thought nothing of pitching camp in the edge of town rather than to seek accommodations locally. Usually, of course we were traveling in unsettled country where accommodations were not available. At the time I took this photograph, we were many miles from any settlement, and from any traveled road.

There was no thought at the time that the scene might at some time in the distant future have historical value. However, a close study of the painting does reveal many interesting features peculiar to that time only.

A leisurely contemplation of the artist's work, and by letting one's imagination have full sway, especially if he enjoys the outdoor life, one can read much between the lines. This would be especially true if one knew some of the crew members!

One familiar with outdoor life and similar surroundings may sit and ponder this painting and relive many of the better experiences of his life. Wide is the range his imagination will take him if he gives it free rein! Most of them will have happy endings, for the Good Lord has fixed us so we tend to remember better our more pleasant experiences. One of the greater values of a painting of this kind are the memories it

recalls to mind; deeds of yesteryear, possibly tender moments words cannot describe! "Art! Its value lies in what its worth to live with, for that is the true value of Art".

The decision to take a picture of the camp that morning came to me on the spur of the moment as I awaited the call to breakfast, enjoying the aroma of frying mountain grouse and the coffee pot. The bright sun rising slowly in the east, behind me, cast a warm glow upon the colorful domestic scene ahead, catching a perfect view of my wife, Inez, as she stands rosy cheeked that frosty morning between the stove and the red and green painted wagon. She dominates the scene as the center of attraction, so aptly planned by the skillful artist.

With the stove loaded with frying pans, and skillets, she deftly spears a choice piece of tender grouse with that ever busy left hand of hers. So intent is she, my picture taking went unnoticed. It is that unforgettable scene that I wished to record for the admiration of future generations!

I should mention here that I was not really in the picture. The artist painted me in place of the teamster who was standing there expectantly, with plate in hand! My brother, Willis, standing in rear had bagged the tasty grouse with his 22 Special Colts.

### About Our Camp

Our little camp stood there, nestled in the shelter of a natural cove. Protected from the north winds by towering Sheep Mountain (not shown). The background of our camp scene is a most unusual one for a wagon camp to have in mid-summer. It was none other than a 50 foot deep bank of crusted snow, the remains of drifts many times that size. After breakfast the crew could not resist the temptation to have a frolic on the snowdrift on that mid-summer day, and have their pictures made as they clamored over the ice-hard snow. The very existence of this giant snowdrift testifies to the high altitude of the place, which, according to a nearby bench mark established by the U. S. Geological Survey, is 9546 feet above sea level.

Although we were well above timber line, and it froze ice every night, many alpine flowers and shrubs were struggling to live out their life cycle in spite of the handicaps! As the snowdrift moved slowly upward, gradually uncovering the dormant plants, the impatient buttercups, Johnny Jumpups, snowdrops, and clustering rock asters lost no time in adding their "thing" to brighten their part of the world.

Even with an inch or more of snow yet to go, the sun's life giving rays penetrated the icy pane, causing the struggling bulb to push up through the ice, straighten up its head and unfold in all its glory! Some of us stuck flowers in our hatbands. It was proper to pick wild flowers under those circumstances! That was as it should be. How else would the little flower get up in the world? That was their only chance to add their bit! Had it not been for our accidental visit, those beauties might have lived in vain! Probably a long, long wait before other visitors came.

## Other Visitors

The existence of half buried teepee rocks nearby bore silent proof of other visits by humans ages ago. Who? When? Let's pretend it was a demure Indian maiden happily picking flowers in the alpine garden above the clouds!

## Permanent Residents!

As we romped over the rocky ledges along the ridge top, and over the long slide-rock slopes, other residents made their presence known. A brown marmot the size of a badger would stand at the door of his rocky home and bark his defiance. Then lope to his neighbor's door, keeping flat on the ground. His short legs, made for digging, seemed to stick out instead of down as he ran. The little four inch long coney sits on his haunches with his ears sticking up, and his mouth full of grass. He's ready to dive in if you make a false move. He's the greatest hay maker! He's forever carrying hay into his den, preparing for a hard winter!

But we must move on! We've got surveying to do at the end of the road! With wagons piled high with tents and beds, we climb on top and yell "Wagons Ho." Winding along the top of the highest ridge we felt as though we were looking down at the whole world! But Lo! Glancing skyward we saw a black speck a half mile above us. A bald eagle, wings motionless, sailed, apparently without effort. Maintaining silent vigil over his domain below! Not much happens in the eagle's homeland that escapes his notice. If a stranger goes near his nesting place, he is quick to scream a warning. Surprisingly, seeing the big bird sailing so high above us, we never once even imagined that one day we might be performing more improbable feats.

The old trail we have been following has now lead us to where the mountains break off into a series of spurs and canyons sloping down to the prairie lands on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana. For a ways we are in a sort of no man's land, near the State Line.

The trail begins to peter out. The sheepmen of Wyoming did not graze their sheep in the Indian Reservation and had no reason for taking wagons beyond this point. Likewise, the Indians had no reason for making a road into Wyoming. Being in a strange land with no wagon tracks to follow, we had to judge for ourselves the best route to take to get off the mountain.

To guide us, we could see in the hazy distance, a green streak outline the position of the cottonwoods and fields along the Big Horn River. Off to the right was a smaller green strip where the Little Horn ran. Our plan was to hit the Little Horn valley a few miles north of the Montana Boundary Line. With those features in mind, we must pick our own way, always mindful of the possibility of coming to a jumping off place where we could not get wagons over.

We often had to roughlock the rear wheels on hills too steep to get back up if we got stuck. In such cases, we would have someone reconnoiter ahead before going blindly down! Naturally, though we took many chances, depending on our judgement in our haste. I might explain that a "roughlock" is made by wrapping a log-chain around the tire of the rear wheel so it would drag on the ground with the end of the chain fastened to the front bolster. As a last resort on a real steep place, a good sized tree with the branches on, was tied to the back of the wagon, with some boys riding on the tree. We did that once in Wyoming on Dead Indian Hill.

In closing I will say that luck was with us on this trip. We arrived safely on a traveled road running up the Little Big Horn; whence all we had to do was drive up south a few miles to our next job.

Our caravan consisted of two wagons, a four-horse team; a two-horse team and a saddle-horse; the crew; of five survey-aids, a cook and teamster. Some are not shown in the painting.

The Painting: By Artist Irvin (Shorty) Shope of Helena, Montana.

Mr. James A. Thigpenn,  
Jacksonville, Fla.

921 Monroe Ave. Helena Montana  
February 13, 1972. 50601

Dear Jimmy:

On October 30, 1971 I sent you two cassettes of my Life History for you to have typed off in your office. The first one is called TEAM sides A and B and covers the period 1913 from Green River Wyoming to Winnett Montana. The other is called Snow Sides A and B covering the period 1914 and 1915 in Montana.

Having heard nothing about those I am wondering what progress your typists have made on those two cassettes. They may have gotten mislaid or something. Or you may be too busy. If they are having any difficulty in arranging them, or anything, maybe I can help straighten them out.

I greatly appreciate what you are trying to do to help me, and do not want to appear impatient, at all.

Sincerely,

*Will*  
William R. Bandy

P.S I am sending under ~~separate~~ cover a picture Titled "Breakfast of the Big Horns!"

I am also enclosing a four page description of the trip we made at the time of the camp scene. I hope you and your family will enjoy reading it as you look at the picture, and discuss camping trips you may have, or episodes it recalls! It took me long enough to write it!

*W.R.B.*

*Correspondence between W.R. Bandy and former FSMS President James Thigpenn III. Bandy was 27 years old at the time of the painting in 1912. He passed away just months after this letter was written, in July of 1972 at age 87.*